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THE CONSERVATISM OF EARLY PROPHECY

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The prophets of Israel are quite generally looked upon as a group of radical reformers who sought to introduce new and revolutionary principles into the Hebrew social order. This is in large part due on the one hand to the fact that their utterances called forth the serious opposition of the leaders of the established order in their own day, and on the other to the wonderful timeliness of the prophetic teachings in relation to the conditions of our times. Nevertheless, the thesis of this paper is that the early Hebrew prophets were not consciously innovators but rather conceived of themselves as standing for full and faithful adherence to the old paths.

There can be little question as to the truth of this proposition for the period prior to Amos. The religion of Yahweh was a late-comer into Canaan. It represented the standards of practice and the ways of thinking current among nomads or seminomads. It was the religion of the desert. Upon entering Canaan it came at once into contact and conflict with a civilization of very high order. Yahwism was face to face with a new world. But religion always and everywhere has been afraid of advancing knowledge. It naturally shrinks and shivers in discomfort and dread when the cold air of progressive science puts to flight its odor of sanctity and the searchlight of truth flashes upon the gloom of its dim religious light. Yahwism was in such a defensive position; but its prophets fully realized the truth of the now familiar adage, "The best defence is an attack."

The civilization of Canaan was inextricably intermingled with Baalism. Religion is a function of culture, and the culture of Canaan was Baalistic. To learn the culture of Canaan was the first necessity for the incoming Hebrew. He could not conduct himself in the midst of civilization precisely as he had done in the

wilds of the steppe country. He must become a farmer, a vine-grower, a merchant. But he must learn the new arts from those who practiced them, viz., his Canaanite neighbors, and they were worshipers of the Baalim. Their Baalism was part and parcel of their day's work. The fruits of the earth were for them the gifts of the Baalim, and their whole agricultural life was dominated and shot through by that conception. When they sowed their fields, they did it to the accompaniment of Baalistic rites; when they reaped their harvests, they celebrated the occasion in Baalistic feasts. The newly arrived immigrant would inevitably sooner or later assume the same attitude. If his crop failed or were less abundant than that of his Baalistic neighbors, any dereliction of duty toward the Baalim would furnish an explanation satisfactory not only to his neighbors, but also to himself. This was a sphere of industry in which Yahweh was not at home. He had had no experience in or associations with vine culture and the like. Herein lay great peril for Yahwism. If the Hebrew farmer must look to the Baalim for the success of his season's work, and if Yahweh is to be confined to those interests which had come over from the desert life, it was a foregone conclusion that the Baalim would become the *real* gods of Israel, and Yahweh would subside more and more into innocuous desuetude.

The prophets were not slow to realize this peril or to set themselves the task of counteracting it. One direct, but utterly futile, method was that of turning the hands of the clock backward. They sought to oppose and obstruct the inevitable progress toward civilization by attacking civilization and branding it as the source of all evil. This hostility to culture appears unmistakably at various points in the prophetic literature. The story of the Fall in its present form, whatever may have been its original motifs,¹ is an example of this hostility. The acquisition of *knowledge* by the eating of the forbidden fruit is the cause of all human toil and trouble. The ideal condition of man is that represented by our first parents in their uncorrupted state—a state of innocence and ignorance; with the quest for knowledge woe begins. The same polemic against culture appears in the story of Cain and

¹ See, e.g., J. G. Frazer, *The Folk-Lore of the Old Testament*, I (1918), 45–52.

Abel. Abel brings an offering of the increase of his flocks and it is accepted; Cain's offering of the products of his toil is rejected. Cain represents the newer agricultural life; Abel stands for the old nomadic cultus. In like manner the prophetic bias against the luxury and vice of the newer civilization is voiced in the story of Noah. "Noah began to be a husbandman and planted a vineyard; and he drank of the wine and became drunken," and in that state he not unnaturally violated the conventionalities. Canaan saw the condition of the old patriarch and was unduly interested therein or amused thereby, with the result that all his descendants were put under a curse. The building of the first city is frustrated by Yahweh's intervention on the ground that it is an impious attempt to rival the power of the gods themselves. A similar anti-Canaanite attitude is revealed in the story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, those indescribably wicked cities of Canaan. It is expressed again in Abram's solicitous arrangements that his son Isaac shall not marry a daughter of Canaan but shall return to the land of Abram's kinsfolk to look for a wife. The same spirit is seen in the story of Dinah and the treacherous slaughter of the disabled Shechemites. E's law of the altar (*Exod.* 20:24-26) emphatically declares the more primitive ways of the nomad cultus to be the ideal and forbids indulgence in the luxurious ritual of Canaan. The law regarding the release of the Hebrew slave incorporated in E's Covenant Code (*Exod.* 21:2 ff.) likewise reveals a conservative attitude. The Hebrew code calls for a service of six years on the part of the serf; the Canaanite practice probably let the slave off at the end of three years (cf. *Deut.* 15:18, and the Code of Hammurabi, § 117.)

Another indication of the tendency in these prophetic narratives to glorify the nomadic period as that in which ideal religion prevailed is the story of Moses at the burning bush. Whether or not the Kenite hypothesis of the origin of Yahwism be the correct explanation, it is clear that the prophetic traditions ascribe to Moses a new revelation of Yahweh during his shepherd life in the desert. The God of the deliverance from Egypt was a desert-god, and he prepared his people for the trying experiences of

Canaan by a long period of training under the tuition of Yahweh in the school of the wilderness. The "tent of meeting" kept alive this aspect of Israel's thought of Yahweh long after the entry into Canaan.

The foregoing illustrations of the anticulture attitude of early prophecy have been furnished by the J and E documents. The larger part of them come from J. This makes it difficult to justify the judgment of a recent writer when he says, "J's friendliness to civilization and the arts is entirely missing in E."¹ If this is friendliness we may well say, "The Lord preserve us from our friends." We now leave the anonymous prophets represented in these prophetic narratives and turn to two men whose names have been preserved for us.

About the middle of the ninth century B.C. there came forward in Israel a new prophet, Elijah the Tishbite. To appreciate the point of view of Elijah and the nature of his task, we must get clearly in mind the situation in northern Israel at this time. King Ahab was on the throne of Samaria. Ahab was heir to a long, agonizing struggle with Damascus, which was sapping the strength of his kingdom. But Ahab was a large-minded, far-seeing statesman. He saw the shadow of an Assyrian conquest looming large upon the horizon. He realized that such a foe could be successfully met only by the united armies of Western Asia. He began to prepare for the coming struggle. He contracted alliances with Judah, Sidon (by marrying Jezebel, daughter of its priest-king), and Damascus, as we learn from the Books of Kings. This neighborliness with Damascus is in striking contrast with the relations between the two states for some decades previous, and that it did not meet with the approbation of the prophets is shown by the prophetic narrative in I Kings, chap. 20. But Ahab adhered to his policy of co-operation and consolidation for purposes of mutual defense, as we learn from the records of Shalmaneser. In 854 we find him at Karkar fighting the Assyrian, who tells us that he overthrew there a coalition of twelve kings, including among others Ahab's forces, troops of Damascus, Hamath, Egypt, the Irganatians, Arvad, the Arabians, and the Ammonites—in all

¹ Brightman, *The Sources of the Hexateuch* (1918), p. 117.

a total of fourteen kings. Shalmaneser claims to have inflicted a severe defeat upon his adversaries; but this claim is open to doubt. At any rate, he did not follow up his so-called victory as one would naturally expect, but found it advisable to return home at once. Still further, it is very significant that Shalmaneser found it incumbent upon him to face this same coalition again in 850, 849, and 846. Shalmaneser seems to have made slow progress as long as this group of allies held together. Ahab was a by no means insignificant member of the alliance. The numbers of the units making up his contingent of the allied forces show that he was one of the most influential and weighty members of the entente.¹

It is into such a situation as this that Elijah thrusts himself. The king and his counselors are busy with international and military problems and are straining every nerve in a mighty struggle, upon the outcome of which depends the future liberty not only of Samaria but of all the peoples of the coast lands at the eastern end of the Mediterranean. Elijah appears as a critic at every step; Ahab can do nothing that is right in his eyes. No wonder that Ahab is reported as having greeted Elijah on one occasion with these words, "Art thou he that troubleth Israel?" As a matter of fact, we know practically nothing as to Elijah's attitude toward the international policy of Ahab; but there are some items of knowledge bearing upon the question that make

¹ Some interpreters would make Ahab's presence at Karkar an evidence that he was there as a vassal of Damascus (so e.g., I. Benginzer and W. E. Barnes, *ad loc.*, and H. Gressmann, *Die Schriften des A. T.*, II, 277). But per contra, see H. P. Smith, *Old Testament History*, p. 195. Kittel (*Geschichte des Volkes Israel* [2d ed., 1909], pp. 359-61) would regard the naming of Ahab in Shalmaneser's inscription as due to an error, and substitute Joram in Ahab's place. But the chronology of the Books of Kings is not a very substantial basis for any hypothesis, and while the Assyrian did err in making Jehu the son of Omri, that is altogether insufficient reason for supposing that Shalmaneser did not know the name of one of his chief antagonists. A noncommittal attitude as to the character of Ahab's relation to Damascus is taken by Stade, *Geschichte des Volkes Israel*, I, 528; J. Skinner, *ad loc.*, and others. C. F. Burney in his recently published commentary on Judges (p. liii), which is an altogether admirable piece of work, proposes to put the battle of Karkar in Ahab's last year, and so to regard it as belonging to the three-year period of friendly alliance between Damascus and Israel which is spoken of in I Kings 22:1.

an inference fairly safe. In the first place, there is the indisputable fact that Ahab regarded Elijah as his enemy. Now it is quite clear that the larger part of Ahab's interest and energy was devoted for a considerable period of years to plans and preparations for the conduct of the struggle against Assyria. A prophet could not have been in sympathy with this feature of Ahab's policy and an active supporter of the same, and have left an impression upon Ahab's mind of unmitigated hostility such as the documents reflect. Upon a question of this sort only one of two attitudes was possible, viz., support or opposition. For a prophet in those days to have been neutral or noncommittal would have been tantamount to downright opposition. In the second place, the records of Ahab's reign, which are of prophetic origin, make not the slightest reference to the battle of Karkar and the Assyrian danger. Were it not for Shalmaneser we should have known nothing of this the most important aspect of Ahab's reign. We may not press the silence of the Books of Kings upon this matter too far; but some silences need explanation. Silence here might conceivably mean indifference to these great movements on the part of the later editorial collectors and revisers of the old historical narratives. But it seems to me more likely that the explanation lies in the attitude of Elijah and his prophetic contemporaries toward this policy of Ahab. If that attitude was hostile, as seems probable, it is not unreasonable to suppose that in the course of time the prophetic literary men realized that this was a chapter of prophetic history that had better be omitted. It certainly reflected little credit upon prophecy that it should be found on record in an attitude of disloyal criticism and opposition to the only policy that stood any chance of turning back the Assyrian flood, and that, too, early in the development of the situation, before Assyria had got so far into Western Asia as to be beyond the possibility of dislodgment by the local forces.

In the third place there is the actual concrete evidence of the opposition of the prophetic party to a policy of coalition contained in the story of the prophetic incident given in I Kings, chap. 20. The shortsightedness of the prophet here compares

very unfavorably with the broad vision of Ahab, the international statesman. The attitude attributed to Elisha in II Kings 6:20 ff. is in striking contrast with I Kings, chap. 20.

In the fourth place there is the well-known hostility of later prophets to alliances with non-Israelitish powers. Hosea and Isaiah are the two outstanding representatives of this attitude (see Hos. 5:13; 7:11; 8:8-10; 12:2; Isa. 18:1 f.; 20:1-6; 30:1-5). This was in part, to be sure, due to the realization on the part of these two prophets that such co-operation in conspiracy against Assyria was foolish and suicidal from a political and military point of view; but more than that, it was a religious conviction; for the prophets in question regarded dependence upon other powers as due to distrust of Yahweh and as giving to foreign gods the confidence and recognition that belonged only to Yahweh. This jealousy of Yahweh's reputation which demanded an undivided allegiance to him was no new thing in the days of Hosea and Isaiah; it was of the very essence of Yahwism and formed the basis of much prophetic criticism of the tolerant policy of Solomon. Hence it is practically certain that the same element of undivided loyalty to Yahweh entered into the prophetic opposition to Ahab's co-operative policy that is associated with the person of Elijah.

Another line of evidence showing that Elijah's opposition to Ahab was in large part directed against his wise, statesman-like policy of co-operation with the neighboring states is furnished by the later course of events. The figure of Elisha is shrouded in the mists of legend, so that not even its main outlines can be definitely determined; but it is at least clear that tradition regarded Elisha and Jehu as having carried the policy of Elijah through to a successful issue. When we say "successful," of course, it is meant only in the sense that the ends sought by the prophetic party were at least partly achieved. From any other point of view the outcome of the Elisha-Jehu program was anything but success. That Jehu was the tool of the prophetic party that followed in the footsteps of Elijah is past all question. He was anointed king, and indeed incited to his deed of usurpation and his orgy of murder, by Elisha's prophetic emissary. Not

only so, but he had the support of the nomadic sect of the Rechabites, as appears from his encounter with Jehonadab on his way from his massacre at Jezreel to his even more bloody one at Samaria. Jehonadab puts himself specifically upon record immediately as indorsing the policy of Jehu and then shares Jehu's chariot while he proceeds to Samaria, where he sees Jehu's bloody "zeal for Yahweh." This indorsement by Jehonadab, the son of Rechab, is a fact of great importance for our contention. It makes indisputably certain the proposition that the anti-Ahab movement in Israel headed by the prophets was essentially anti-civilization propaganda. Jehonadab is referred to in *Jer.*, chap. 35, as the founder of the sect of the Rechabites, and the program of the Rechabites as there outlined is frankly and avowedly an attempt to maintain the customs and standards of the desert life in the name of religion.

That the outcome of the Elisha-Jehu program was not at all commendable from the practical point of view is at once evident. The slaughter of so large a number of the leading men of the nation, men of military skill and political experience, could not but weaken the power of the nation, and that at a time when all her strength was needed. The abandonment of the older policy of co-operation was a fatal step. The results of these two things became speedily apparent. We are told in *II Kings* 10:32 f. that "in those days (viz., the days of Jehu) Yahweh began to cut off from Israel, and Hazael smote them in all the borders of Israel; from the Jordan eastward, all the land of Gilead, the Gadites, Reubenites, and the Manassites, from Aroer, which is by the valley of Arnon, even Gilead and Bashan." In *II Kings* 13:7 we read that in the days of Jehu's son and successor Jehoahaz "he left not to Jehoahaz of the people save fifty horsemen and ten chariots and ten thousand footmen; for the king of Syria destroyed them and made them like the dust in threshing." This is in sad contrast with the figures furnished by Shalmaneser for the expeditionary force of Ahab at Karkar, which he reckons as comprising "2,000 chariots, 10,000 men." It should be noted also that in 842 B.C. Jehu paid tribute to Shalmaneser. Thus we have the significant fact that precisely during the period in which the

prophetic party was in practical control of affairs in northern Israel that kingdom was reduced to its lowest terms. The early prophets, prior to Amos, were wedded to a policy that proved a failure. We may go even farther, I think, and say that the policy of these prophets, if it had been permanently and completely successful in commanding the adherence of the nation and its rulers, would have spelled ruin for the religion of Yahweh itself, to which the prophets were devoted with such fanatical enthusiasm. These prophets were hostile to the advance of civilization. They identified civilization with Baalism and thus could think of it only as anti-Yahwistic. They sought to carry over into the life of Canaan and to make regnant there the customs and ideals of the steppe. They did not realize that "new occasions teach new duties." They failed to reckon with the fact that life is a unit, and that therefore any change in one of its aspects involves inevitably corresponding change and adjustment in all other aspects. If the economic basis of life be revolutionized and the social customs be completely reorganized, as is necessarily the case in such a transition from nomadic or seminomadic life to a settled agricultural status as Israel experienced in taking up her station in Canaan, it is impossible that the religious interpretation of life shall not be vitally affected. Had the prophets been able to keep Yahweh within the limits of a nomadic interpretation of the universe, it goes without saying that Yahweh could never have become the sole God of the civilized world.

This discussion has thus far covered but one stage of a larger subject. I may only suggest its nature now. The policy of hostility to civilization did not win. Was this failure in spite of the best efforts of the later prophets from Amos on to champion it and carry it through to triumphant dominance? If so, what influences of a contrary sort came in of such a powerful character as to render the efforts of the prophets futile? Or did Amos and his successors represent a radical change in this respect in that they abandoned the policy of opposition to culture and set themselves deliberately to the task of making Yahweh, the desert God, recognized as the lord of all the ways of civilized man? Are those scholars therefore to be acknowledged right who speak of Amos as "the founder of

a new phase of prophecy,”¹ or “the pioneer of a process of evolution from which a new epoch of humanity dates,”² or “the beginner of the new prophecy”?³ Whatever may be the answer to these questions, we are left with a further problem, viz., what new influences operated, either in co-operation with prophecy or in opposition thereto, to bring about in Israel, in and after the eighth century B.C., a broadening of the conception of Yahweh and a thoroughgoing moralization of the Yahweh religion? What candidates are there in the field for this honor? Is it to be assigned to the credit of the Assyrian armies,⁴ or to a powerful stream of Egyptian cultural influence that may have made itself felt at this time, or to the unassisted growth of the native Hebrew spirit? The discussion of these questions must be deferred.

¹ Wellhausen, *Prolegomena*, p. 472.

² Cornill, *Prophets of Israel*, p. 46.

³ Smend, *Lehrbuch der Religionsgeschichte*, 2d ed., p. 184.

⁴ See G. Adam Smith’s fine chapter on “The Influence of Assyria upon Prophecy” in *The Book of the Twelve Prophets*, Vol. I.